

VZCZCXRO4813
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0553/01 1131505
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 221505Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1622
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY 1182
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 2175
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 2460
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000553

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, NEA/IPA, PRM/FO, AND PM/FO
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER
TREASURY FOR U/S LEVEY
DEPT PASS TO EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/21/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KPAL](#) [PTER](#) [IR](#) [AR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: FORMER PM STRESSES JOB CREATION TO
COUNTER EXTREMISM IN NORTH

BEIRUT 00000553 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons section
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Charge Sison discussed ways to develop the northern region of Akkar with former PM Najib Mikati as a means to counter Sunni extremism in the area. Mikati argued for legitimizing the existence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon via identification and work permits as a means to rid Lebanon of Palestinian "ghettos." He downplayed recent Christian clashes in the north, though admitted he was more worried about Christian-Muslim violence than Sunni-Shia. Mikati did not believe that Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman would ever see office as president. End summary.

¶2. (C) Charge Sison, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with former Prime Minister Najib Mikati at his office in downtown Beirut on April 21. Noting that Mikati hailed from Tripoli, the Charge mentioned the Embassy's assistance in the poverty-stricken northern region of Akkar, including youth outreach and financial assistance in the aftermath of the Nahr al-Barid conflict, to help promote the region economically and counter extremist tendencies. You provide the ideas and operational assistance, and we'll provide the financial support, Mikati agreed.

¶3. (C) Mikati did not believe Sunnis in Tripoli had links to Al-Qaida, but worried that they might share the same "mentality." He himself had recently organized an event in Tripoli aimed at helping to develop a new culture of Islamic moderatism. We need to provide social and economic support -- and jobs above all else -- to divert young Sunnis from the attraction of extremists. Lebanon's youth is our future, he said, and we need to pull them towards the west so that they will not be pushed into the extremists' hand.

¶4. (C) Akkar, a booming industrial area in the 1960s, now suffered from plant closures and an inability to compete with manufacturing in other countries, and the relaxation of tariffs on imported EU goods would kill off the remaining industries, Mikati said. He agreed that developing the Akkar airport (for which the U.S. financed the TDA feasibility

study) to specialize in cargo could turn the area into a regional hub for companies like Amazon and DHL.

15. (C) Mikati also mentioned other projects, such as developing land for dairy farming, in which he was involved in the north, to create jobs. I don't look at feasibility studies, he said, I look at how many jobs these projects will create. Dairy farming was compatible with both the land and the mentality of the people who live there, he said.

16. (C) However, "politics are killing us," he sighed. Saad Hariri's Future Movement is the strongest politically in the north, not because they are doing anything to help the area, but because of a continuing attachment to the "icon" of Rafiq Hariri. Other Sunnis, like Mikati, Transportation Minister Mohamad Safadi, and former PM Omar Karamé could not compete at the same level, he said. Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh was strongest among the Christians, continuing to play his feudal-like role, and Mikati did not expect him to gain or lose support.

17. (C) The society in Tripoli is the most conservative in Lebanon, he explained; people are extremely closed and are virtually impossible to penetrate. Seventy percent are middle class and educated, but they will never tell you what they really think or where they stand. Twenty percent are poor and can be bought. The remaining ten percent are either former members of Syrian intelligence or linked to the Lebanese security services.

LEGITIMIZE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

18. (C) Mikati agreed that Palestinian refugees in Lebanon would be one of the top five issues for any future

BEIRUT 00000553 002.2 OF 002

government. However, the problem was not that difficult, he said. All we need to do is have the Palestinian Authority issue passports so that the refugees have some sort of identification, then, using this, they can apply for residency permits in Lebanon. If they can find jobs, we should give them work permits. Only by legitimizing their presence in Lebanon can we get rid of the Palestinian "ghettos," he said.

19. (C) This is not the same as "tawteen," he said, since they would not be granted citizenship. Noting that he had met Hamas leader Khaled Meshal during the most recent Hajj in Saudi Arabia, as well as Abu Mazen, Mikati said both agreed with him that it was better to legitimize the situation by creating a scheme for "home ownership" since the Palestinians already were in Lebanon. (Note: Under Lebanese law, Palestinians are not allowed to own property. End note.)

CHRISTIAN CLASHES

110. (C) Mikati believed that the April 20 killing of two Phalange party members in Zahl by members of Ily Skaiff's bloc would be contained. However, the accumulation of such events over time could lead to a rash of violence, though it was more likely to take the form of more Christian on Christian or Christian against Muslim than Shia against Sunni. The Zahle incident was just "another drop in the glass," he said.

SLEIMAN'S UNLIKELY ELECTION

111. (C) Mikati called Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman a serious candidate, "so long as there's no election." Once it came time to hold the election, he posited, there would be a last-minute reshuffling of the cards.

THE GRAND PHILANTHROPIST

¶12. Mikati mentioned several endowments he was financing, including a Middle East chair at the University of Chicago and one for liver studies at Cleveland Hospital. He also had worked with AUB in Tripoli to develop a urinary laboratory, stressing that he undertook such projects for social reasons only. "You can't do business with health issues," he explained. Mikati also had been in touch with the International College in Beirut to establish a branch in Tripoli. "You get back what you give," he said.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Despite Mikati's claims of apolitical philanthropy, he is still a political animal whose name is often mentioned as a possible candidate to lead a new interim cabinet as he did in 2005. Close to the Syrians, Mikati has gone out of his way to polish his image with the U.S., ensuring that none of the charitable organizations he supports are on U.S. terrorist lists. We do not believe his views on how to solve the problem of Palestinian camps in Lebanon will sit well with non-Sunnis. End comment.

SISON